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The United States and Afghanistan: Ten Years On from 9/11
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This autumn we commemorated two anniversaries. First, and most widely observed, was the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Perhaps not quite as widely noted was that last week we observed the 10th anniversary of the commencement of military operations against the Taliban regime on October 7th 2001.

For many Americans the fall of 2001 was perhaps the first time that Afghanistan registered on the national consciousness. But, actually, US involvement in Afghanistan goes back somewhat further. This is a history that is known primarily to area specialists and foreign policy practitioners, but I think it is worth reviewing in brief summary.

By the standards of Afghanistan's 4000 year recorded history, the United States is a newcomer. Our formal relationship dates to 1921 when President Harding wrote to Emir Amanullah Khan recognizing the independent Afghanistan that had emerged from the treaty of Rawalpindi in 1919. For the next two decades, our relationship consisted primarily of exchanges of letters at the Head of State level, until the United States opened a legation in Kabul in 1942. This diplomatic mission, which operated continuously until 1989, was the predecessor of the Embassy at which I serve, now one of the largest in the world.

In 1945, negotiations began between the Afghan government and an American company--Morrison-Knudsen of Boise Idaho--on the construction of two diversion dams, one on the Helmand River and the other on its chief tributary, the Arghandab River. The Kajaki Dam project, which was completed in 1953, was initially a private venture contracted by the Afghan Government, but later received financing from the Export Import Bank of the United States, making it the first example of US Government assistance in Afghanistan. Thus, in southern Afghanistan, there began the largest and most ambitious project ever undertaken in the history of modern Afghanistan and the start of a serious engagement in the Afghan-US relationship.

The capital of Helmand Province, a town that was already ancient when the armies of Ghenghis Khan arrived in the 13th century, became the center of the U.S. development program. The Americans called the town Lashkar Gah. The Afghans called it Little America. For 30 years during the cold war, Americans carried out the largest development project in Afghanistan's history, building a modern provincial capital with tree-lined streets and white-stucco suburban-style tract houses somewhat reminiscent of subdivisions in the American southwest. There was a co-ed high school and a community pool. The Helmand-Arghandab Valley Authority was established, modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority, one of the signature programs of the New Deal. The Authority built a giant hydroelectric dam at Kajaki and 300 miles of canals that turned 250,000 arid acres into a fertile triangle. The program was so successful that it

transformed Helmand from a region that was plagued by periodic famine to the breadbasket of Afghanistan.

The work was done in partnership with what was then the Kingdom of Afghanistan, in particular with King Zahir Shah, who wanted close relations with the United States to balance his geographic proximity to the Soviet Union. The United States declined Afghanistan's request for defense cooperation but extended an economic assistance program focused on the development of Afghanistan's physical infrastructure—roads, dams, and power plants. Later, U.S. aid shifted from infrastructure projects to technical assistance programs to help develop the skills needed to build a modern economy.

From 1950 to 1979, the United States provided Afghanistan with more than 500 million dollars in loans, grants, and surplus agricultural commodities to develop transportation facilities, increase agricultural production, expand the educational system, stimulate industry, and improve government administration.

The Peace Corps was active in Afghanistan between 1962 and 1979, and 1,652 Peace Corps volunteers served there in various sectors including agriculture, business, education, health, and youth and community development. When the Peace Corps recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, one of its guests of honor was Dr Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (who spoke here at the Watson Institute last May), in recognition of Afghanistan's role as one of the early hosts of the Peace Corps.

Unfortunately, by the late nineteen seventies, US government development programs – including those run by the US Agency for International Development (founded in 1961, a bit more than a decade after US assistance to Afghanistan began) – became victims of Afghanistan's increasing domestic strife. After the Saur revolution of 1978, our assistance programs came to a halt. The deteriorating situation was brought home to Americans by the death of Ambassador Adolph "Spike" Dubs on February 14, 1979, in retrospect a harbinger of much bloodier events, especially the occupation by Soviet forces in December of that year.

The history of US involvement with the anti-Soviet Mujahideen is well known to the audience, and covered in works by Steven Coll and others, and even films, such as Charlie Wilson's War, so I will not cover it in great detail today. Suffice to say that the US involvement in this period was intense, and again US assistance played a significant role in the eventual withdrawal of Soviet Forces in accordance with the Geneva Accords (to which the US was a party) in February of 1989.

For many Americans today, this is a controversial period in our history, but it doesn't necessarily look that way from Afghanistan. To this day, Afghans celebrate February 15th as a national holiday and regard the withdrawal of the Soviet Union as a great victory. It was what followed the Soviet withdrawal -- including the collapse of the Najibullah regime, the infighting amongst Mujahideen commanders in which much of Kabul was destroyed, and the eventual

triumph of the Taliban regime -- that many Afghans regard as one of the most difficult periods in their recent history.

And it is in this period that I think we can find the greatest lessons about US involvement, or lack thereof. After having remained open throughout the Soviet occupation, the US Embassy in Kabul closed in 1989. US Assistance to Afghanistan stopped; Pakistan, our ally in the war against the Soviets, was placed under sanctions. The United States rapidly disengaged from Afghanistan and Pakistan in a series of decisions for which we would ultimately pay a significant price. As former Defense Secretary Gates observed during Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in December 2007.

"I was deputy director of CIA and then deputy national security advisor during the period when the Soviets did withdraw from Afghanistan, and the United States essentially turned its back on Afghanistan. And five years later came the first attack on the World Trade Center. And so, [you know,] one of the lessons that I think we have is that if we abandon these countries, once we are in there and engaged, there is a very real possibility that we will pay a higher price in the end."

And as Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns observed in a speech at Brookings last month:

"As the United States draws down our forces and transfers responsibility for security to the Afghan people, we are ever mindful of Afghanistan's recent history and the terrible cost of neglect. None of us can afford to make that mistake again."

There are many anecdotes that one could summon from the lost decade of the nineties, but for me it is the mental image of the irrigation systems of Little America that the US had laboriously built in the 60s and 70s serving to irrigate poppy fields. Helmand is now the world's largest opium-producing region, responsible for 75 percent of the world's total production.

And it is almost superfluous to mention that Afghanistan under the Taliban Regime became the host of Al-Qaeda, setting the stage for 9/11. Just two days before 9/11, one of Afghanistan's greatest leaders in the fight first against the Soviets, then against the Taliban – Ahmad Shah Massoud – was assassinated by operatives linked to Al-Qaeda. Just four weeks later, we launched military operations in Afghanistan, and, with the assistance of our Afghan allies, removed the Taliban from power.

Our response to 9/11 was not just military, but also political and diplomatic, as we and other members of the international community reengaged with the Afghan political process, supporting the Bonn Conference. In January of 2002, the US Embassy in Kabul reopened, under the leadership of my current boss, Ambassador Ryan Crocker. Thus began a decade of unprecedented engagement with Afghanistan, not just by the US Military, but by all elements of the US Government, especially since the announcement of the civilian and diplomatic surges in 2009.

When American forces, diplomats and development experts came to Afghanistan nearly 10 years ago, we found a country divided, where poverty was rampant and life expectancy and literacy were among the world's lowest. Young women especially --but young men as well -- often were deprived of the right to an education. Afghanistan and its people had suffered enormously during two decades of occupation and conflict.

So what have we – Afghans and Americans -- accomplished in 10 years?

On the military side, we have significantly weakened Al-Qaeda's core leadership, removing not just Osama bin Ladin, but other key leaders of the terrorist organization. Working with 48 other countries within the NATO-led ISAF coalition, we have reversed the Taliban's momentum and denied Afghanistan as a safehaven for terrorist organizations.

We and our ISAF partners have built Afghan Security forces that number nearly 300,000, and which are increasingly taking the lead on security operations. In seven provinces and districts that are home to 25 percent of the population, NATO has already handed over the lead for security to Afghan forces, with more to follow by the end of this year. The goal is for Afghan forces to assume lead responsibility throughout the country by the end of 2014, and they are well on their way to doing so.

The U.S. has provided more economic assistance to Afghanistan than to any other country, including Iraq. After 10 years and more than 21 billion dollars in foreign aid, we have achieved some real successes.

This 21 billion is about the equivalent, in real terms, to the assistance that the United States provided on a bilateral basis under the Marshall Plan to significant European partners, with the rather significant difference that European nations were high income countries that had been set back by a half decade of war, whereas Afghanistan was, and remains, one of the poorest countries in the world with a Gross Domestic Product per capita between 300 and 400 dollars a year. That said, our achievements have been significant:

• More Afghan citizens receive direct services from their government – including education, health care, power, water, and others – than at any time in recent memory.
• We have trained more than 22,000 healthcare workers, contributing to a 22 percent drop in infant deaths.
• Access to basic health services – defined as the percentage of the Afghan population within a two hour walk of a health care facility - has increased from 8 to 60 percent since 2002.
• Seven million children are now in primary and secondary school, nearly 37 percent of whom are girls. That's up from less than a million kids in school, most of whom were boys, under the Taliban.
• Our assistance has rehabilitated approximately 2,500 kilometers of regional and national highways, giving eighty percent of Afghans better connections to their country's major transportation routes, and facilitating their access to markets, schools, health clinics and government services.

• In 2001, one million Afghans had access to telecommunications services; in 2011, 14 million Afghans have such access. Investments in communications towers, text messaging services and broadcast capacity have made telecommunications the brightest spot in the Afghan economy.
• Afghan Government revenues have grown annually by 20 percent to $1.6 billion, with a 400 percent increase in customs revenues since 2006; an important fact for future fiscal viability.
• Economic growth has averaged 10 percent a year since 2002.
• In 2002, only a fraction of Kabul's residences and businesses had access to electricity. Now lights are on in Kabul 24/7. We have supported the addition of 230 megawatts worth of new electricity generation, providing power to 1.5 million residents.
• Since 2002, more than 5 million refugees have returned home to Afghanistan, increasing the estimated population of Afghanistan by 20 percent. The US, working through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and NGOs, is assisting by providing reintegration services to returning Afghans.

To accomplish this mission, the US Government dramatically increased the number of civilians on the ground in Afghanistan from around 320 in January 2009 to about 1,200 today, with approximately 760 in Kabul and 440 in the provinces, including some in very remote districts.

Earlier this year, Secretary Clinton laid out in a speech in New York three foundations for American policy in Afghanistan: (1) a strong military effort to defeat Al Qaeda and support Afghans as they secure their sovereignty; (2) a civilian push to promote economic development and good governance; and (3) a diplomatic surge to support an Afghan-led reconciliation process designed to end 30 years of war.

We must support a secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan within a secure, stable and prosperous region. Two important international conferences – a summit of regional leaders hosted by Turkey in Istanbul in early November and the "Bonn+10" conference chaired by the Afghan Government and hosted by Germany in December – should build further regional and international support for Afghanistan.

In Istanbul, Afghanistan will ask its neighbors and near-neighbors to recommit themselves to Afghanistan's security and sovereignty and to offer concrete political and diplomatic support to Afghanistan as it confronts the challenges and opportunities of transition and reconciliation. As similar assurances have been offered in the past, Afghanistan is also asking its neighbors and near-neighbors to agree to a mechanism for ongoing regional consultations so that these commitments can be tracked and strengthened over time. We believe these objectives are right and achievable.

In Bonn, some 85 foreign ministers and the heads of 15 or more international organizations will meet to mark 10 years since the Bonn Agreement launched the political process that has led to an increasingly sovereign Afghanistan. This will be an opportunity for the international community to endorse this regional vision and reaffirm a long term-investment in Afghanistan and its neighbors – and make clear that a transition to Afghan security leadership does not

mean the end of international engagement. The countries represented in Bonn will not only be our traditional allies and partners, but also countries from across the Muslim world that recognize their own interests in a stable, secure and prosperous Afghanistan.

We also recognize that we must reduce the international assistance we provide to Afghanistan, but we must do it in a non-disruptive way, and in a way that helps Afghanistan build up its own revenue streams, building sustainable infrastructure and capacity, reducing corruption, and promoting the country's integration into the commercial life of a vital region. Secretary Clinton has called for the development of a "New Silk Road" of increased trade and development throughout the region. We are encouraging private sector investment in key sectors, including high value licit agriculture and the extractive industries. This is an effort to secure Afghan, regional, and international commitments to support the transition and develop a sustainable Afghan economy, building on a set of projects drawn entirely from Afghan priorities—rail links, mining, natural gas pipelines, dams, and transmission lines. These kinds of regional transit, power and trade projects will build economic linkages between the countries of South and Central Asia, helping to reinforce nascent political and social linkages.

And as we look toward this brighter future for the Afghan people, it is worth nothing that the United States and our partners across the Atlantic have already committed to stand by Afghanistan. Last November, NATO and the Government of Afghanistan signed a Declaration on Enduring Partnership at the NATO Summit in Lisbon. This partnership represents a commitment by NATO to provide long-term political and practical support to Afghanistan beyond the current ISAF mission and is in recognition of the strategic importance of NATO's engagement in Afghanistan.
The United States is making headway in negotiating a new Strategic Partnership document with the Afghans to make clear the nature of our relationship beyond 2014. We know the cost of walking away from Afghanistan. As Secretary Clinton has said regarding our long-term commitment to Afghanistan's stability "we will be there."

Conclusion

If one reads nothing but the headlines, it is easy to be pessimistic about Afghanistan. And the challenges we face are real, in the security arena, in economic transition, and in reconciliation. But at the same time, there has been substantial improvement in the lives of Afghans over the past decade. Since forty-two percent of Afghans are under the age of 14, a significant percentage of the population, especially the half or so who live in cities, know a better life than any of their predecessors.

In times of economic challenges at home, and newer opportunities and challenges abroad, it is tempting to think to that we have not accomplished much in Afghanistan, and to succumb to the urge to cut our losses. That is analytically wrong, because as I have tried to explain, we have some substantial successes to point to.

But, more important, it would be a mistake. The object lesson for the United States of the past 30 years of Afghan history is that disengagement has led to disaster. We ignore this lesson at our peril.